

Greater Yellowstone Coalition

People protecting the lands, waters, and wildlife of the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem, now for the next generations.

Bill No.

58414



March 22, 2011

Dear Chairman Lewis and members of the Senate Finance and Claims Committee,

Thursday morning your committee will hear S.B. 414 which revises the state wolf policy and creates the Montana Wolf Control Act. We ask that you oppose S.B. 414 for the following reasons:

1. This bill undermines Montana's wolf management plan which was developed through a collaborative process that included hunters, ranchers, conservationists and many others. Montana developed a wolf management plan that works and has developed a solid track record of adaptive wolf management. Montana's plan effectively balances the goal of a self-sustaining wolf population with the need to minimize conflicts with livestock and big game populations. S.B. 414 will upset that balance and impede the science-based management of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.
2. Overriding Montana's federally approved management plan will only delay the day the state gets to manage its wolves. Montana's wolf management plan and regulations are approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) under the requirements of the Endangered Species Act. This is a critical step toward the eventual delisting of wolves. This bill will almost certainly cause the USFWS to reevaluate its approval of Montana's wolf management plan. Both the proposed settlement currently under review by the Montana district court and the federal legislative language included in the long-term Continuing Resolution hinge on Montana's 2003 Wolf Conservation and Management Plan remaining in place. In short, the most promising paths to restore state management in Montana depend upon Montana's federally approved management plan.
3. This bill weakens MCA 87-3-130 with regard to wolves. MCA 87-3-130 allows the taking of wildlife to protect people or livestock if the wolf is "attacking, killing, or threatening to kill a person or livestock." In the case of wolves, MCA 87-3-130 extends this ability to kill a wolf in the act to domestic dogs as well. (See <http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/mca/87/3/87-3-130.htm>) This statute is an important component of Montana's wolf management regulations which, again, have been approved by the US Fish and Wildlife Service as "adequate regulatory mechanisms" for the management of wolves once they are delisted. S.B. 414 allows a private landowner, or anyone they designate as "an agent" to kill a wolf at any time for any reason with apparently no limitation. This unregulated killing of wolves by anyone on private land will cause a re-evaluation of Montana's regulatory mechanisms, once again threatening efforts to return wolf management authority to the state.

4. The bill requires the removal of entire wolf packs for any livestock depredation. Currently, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks responds to confirmed livestock loss by wolves in an adaptive way based on the status of the overall wolf population and a particular pack's history of depredation on livestock. Were FWP to be required to simply remove all wolves in response to any conflict, Montana's wolf population would quickly be reduced below the thresholds that ensure the state can continue to manage its wolves. No one should want to see wolves returned to the Endangered Species List because the state wildlife agency has been forced by the legislature to manage wolves in an unsustainable way.

Montana's Wolf Management Plan was formulated based on extensive public input, in an open process that included all stakeholders. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service approved that plan and accompanying regulations; since receiving that approval, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks has been the lead agency on wolf management under a cooperative agreement with the USFWS even while wolves remain a listed species. **Amending Montana's plan now may void that approval and will only further delay delisting.**

Furthermore, the proposed settlement regarding the ongoing wolf litigation relies on the commitments Montana made in its 2003 wolf management plan. As one of the organizations supporting this proposed settlement, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of upholding the existing plan and regulations at this critical juncture.

Let's respect the wishes of the public and move forward with managing wolves like other Montana wildlife, such as elk and black bears.

Please vote No on HB 414 and protect Montana's broadly supported wolf management plan.

Sincerely,



Barb Cestero
Montana Director